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Affirmation of 'MB theology of baptism'

by Roger Thiessen

Introduction

One of the most difficult endeavors we attempt as a church is to walk the tightrope between purity and freedom. On the one hand we have the responsibility of keeping the bride of Christ pure and free from blemish, on the other hand we are commissioned to reach out to a hurting bruised world with the message of freedom to be found in the person of Jesus Christ. Which responsibility deserves more emphasis, internal purity or relevant witness? Are these two goals compatible or are they in conflict? As I continue in my understanding of Jesus as presented by the Gospel writers and as he presents himself, I am increasingly aware that Jesus is more radical than I am comfortable with. Where I would choose safety and black and white I hear Jesus calling for risk and a life lived in the gray. I wish I could tame Jesus, make Him fit my sensibilities, but He continues to defy my desire for moderation.

Jesus' call for his followers is to join Him and live the abundant life. What does this following entail? To be a follower of Jesus is to be in relationship, and relationships are a dance of interpretation and discernment. As Mennonite Brethren we are not comfortable with dancing be it the physical act or in our spirit. But we are not given a formula to follow or checklist to mark which if done correctly then completes the task of discipleship. Instead, Jesus invites us into the awkward dance. We journey together with Jesus under the empowerment and filling of the Holy Spirit and our task is to constantly be asking, "What is life-giving?"

So, as we attempt to ask what the relationship is between baptism and membership, and who should be accepted and under what practice, we are forced to ask the question, "What is life-giving?" It would be far easier to ask, "What rule can we establish to cover all circumstances and experiences?" Easier may be safer but it is not necessarily better. Again we hear Jesus calling us to choose life and freedom. Jesus broke rules when they interfered with His attempts to bring life to people. The hard choice is interpretation and discernment. This is also the better choice.

Pastoral application

At the end of his paper Lynn Jost opens the discussion of accepting people from evangelical churches who were baptized as infants, consequently made a faith commitment to Jesus, and were then confirmed in an evangelical

community upon reaching the age of accountability. Lynn opens a door we would rather leave shut. We are afraid that if we open this door we will not be able to shut the door when we want to and will be forced to live with decisions beyond what we are comfortable with. Theology is never done in a vacuum. Pronouncements from ecclesiastical ivory towers have to be lived in the reality of people's lives. One of the realities we live with in our churches is that people's lives don't conform to categories and laid out scripts. Life is messy and unpredictable and will circumvent all attempts made to corral it.

Lynn Jost outlines the process we have followed that has brought us to where we are today. Our origins trace back to the early Anabaptists who argued for function over form. They engaged in adult baptism to demonstrate that faith is a personal decision, not something that is bestowed on a person because of their birth or by their church. As we moved further in history we also were trapped in the legalism of mode of baptism. That tradition caused my parents to be separated for Communion because my mother came from a church that poured rather than immersed, and as such she could not participate in the Lord's Supper with my father. And now we come to the present and some are asking whether we are once again caught duplicating the errors of the past. Is it our intent to testify to the reality of Jesus Christ in the life of a person or are we endeavoring to maintain a distinctive, and define ourselves in opposition to those who are our brothers and sisters in Christ?

It would seem that Lynn Jost has been spying into my life as a pastor when he gives his hypothetical case. I have encountered just this scenario, where an individual has been raised in an evangelical tradition that practices infant baptism. The individual has then professed a personal relationship in Jesus Christ, proceeded through confirmation and publicly declared personal faith before their congregation. This individual marries a Mennonite Brethren and they choose our church as their home church. As they become involved and begin to raise a family the individual seeks to become a member of the church. As a pastor I have no doubt as to the sincerity of their faith, I have seen their commitment to Jesus Christ demonstrated in growth and service. As we listen to their story we ask that they be re-baptized. At this point there is an uncomfortable silence and we begin a dialogue that ends with pain. Our request for the individual to be re-baptized is met with a plea for an exception. Such individuals are not against baptism and recognize the need for a public confession and personal decision to follow Christ but they feel they have done just that. Such individuals have concerns that what we are asking denigrates the tradition they have grown up in and still appreciate and value. They continue and share the pain this would cause their family as it could be interpreted as denying their parents sincere teaching. And lastly we talk of personal integrity to faith experience and the individual not wanting to just jump through a hoop to satisfy our requirements. We part in disagreement and I am saddened. As I reflect, I am haunted by Jesus' call to life, His willingness to break rules when they interfere with grace and mercy. I ask myself, has this person not done all we do with our rite of baptism just with less water? Does the water communicate grace? And I recoil at the thought that we have moved

to valuing the ritual and symbolism over the reality of transformation. I again ask a question, have we denied our ancestral aim to value function over form? Have we switched places and are we in need of reformation?

This is not a call for an open free-for-all without thought and process. I heard recently at a denominational meeting that a certain decision would then open a door that would then lead to other doors opening eventually leading us to a place we did not want to be. That is flawed logic. One decision does not always lead to another. We always have opportunity and responsibility to discern each step we take. That is the tension of remaining internally pure as the bride of Christ and relevantly witnessing to a lost world. Lynn Jost gives us a guide in which to make these decisions. Lynn outlines a three-fold criteria, infant baptism in a church from an evangelical tradition, a personal faith commitment to Jesus, and confirmation in an evangelical church upon reaching an age of accountability.

Summary

Please allow me a brief digression. I am saddened by the way our theological and ecclesiastical discussions have gone in recent years. Whether it be the subject of women in ministry, or spiritual warfare, or any number of other topics, we have followed a course of accusations and caricaturing to force us into taking oppositional sides. It seems we are choosing to label people and strike doctrinal camps rather than listen to each other and seek the Spirit's leading. It would be wonderful if we could conclude our time together with the statement, "It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and us." And if that is not our conclusion, we should part company with love, grace, mercy, and respect.

I believe that our interests are served in pursuing a course that seeks to liberate people rather than seeking to protect what makes us comfortable. As followers of Jesus we are constantly discerning God's will and leading. We know in our hearts that our desire for black and white rarely aligns us with the call of God. As we draw lines in the sand, Jesus comes and invites us to dance and the hem of his robe obscures and sometimes even brushes away the lines we have drawn. As we dance with Jesus we are forced into an interpretative context, both scripturally and experientially. We ask, "God what are you doing here, and what are you calling us to do and be?" The answer comes, "Choose risk over comfort, choose grace and mercy over law, choose internal purity and relevant witness, choose life in the Spirit." If I am honest, I admit I do not like dancing. I like black and white. I like doors that I can shut easily. My first inclination is to safety and comfort. But I desire to follow Jesus, He has the living water, so I enter the dance.

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